

A Song for Issy Bradley: a Novel and Poetics

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ABSTRACT

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This practice-led research with poetics examines, through creative practice, themes of doubt, faith and miracles in a Mormon context. *A Song for Issy Bradley* (Hutchinson, 2014) is a product of practice-based research and research for form and content. The novel describes the effects of a sudden bereavement on the Bradleys, a Mormon family. The third person narrative moves between the perspectives of each family member as they grieve and re-examine long-held beliefs, amid the comfort and confinement of their religious community.

The poetics investigates some of the themes that surfaced during the practice-led research, including the absence of parenthood and domesticity from traditional happily-ever-after endings, the use of autobiography as a feminist resource and the presence of domestic dramas in non-fiction writing as a matter of intersection rather than one of invasion.

The poetics discusses the derogatory use of the word ‘domestic’ when referencing fiction written by women and the ‘problem’ of motherhood for female writers. These issues are explored with reference to fiction by Helen Simpson, Carol Shields, Tillie Olsen, Tessa Hadley, Lionel Shriver and Margaret Forster.

This is followed by a discussion of the narrative strategies in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* and Alice Munro’s short stories, with reference to the narrative strategies employed in *A Song for Issy Bradley*. And finally, the poetics considers silences surrounding women’s life experiences and the illuminating properties of ‘domestic’ fiction and non-fiction.

DECLARATION

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a Higher Degree at any other educational institution.

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Poetics

In these poetics I shall discuss how I came to literature and writing, how my reading influenced my writing, and how I came to write *A Song for Issy Bradley*. I intend to embrace the ‘split subjectivity’ described by Patricia Yaegar in an article titled ‘Pre-Postmodernism: Academic Feminism and the Kitchen Sink.’ Yaegar suggests that the ‘autobiographical writing invading the academy today represents more than a split subjectivity pushing its way into sensuous prominence amidst the abstractions of theory-speak’ (Yaegar 1994, p.22). She describes autobiography as a feminist resource and argues that women should continue to wash their dirty laundry in public for as long as their lives ‘depend upon the dramas that happen behind the kitchen sink’ (Yaegar 1994, p.22). Much of my life to date has depended on the dramas that happen in kitchens and living rooms; the presence of some of those dramas in this essay is not a matter of invasion, rather it is one of intersection.

As a teen I enthusiastically worked my way through the complete works of Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, the Brontës, E.M Forster, Charles Dickens, D.H Lawrence and more – it seemed that in order to be deserving of my attention, a writer must first be dead. I read very little contemporary fiction, but I imagined I had plenty of time to work my way up to the present day. However, at nineteen I dropped out of university and, a couple of months later, I was married. Over the course of the following seven years I had five children and I read only in snatched moments, easy-reads purchased at the supermarket and romance novels borrowed from a small, local library; books about single women who bought beautiful clothes, worked in offices, fell in love and then presumably lived happily ever after, although it was hard to be certain because their stories ended before childbirth and domesticity – in fact, as the curtain fell, the women might as well have died. Perhaps the part that came after these stories, the domestic part, was not appealing to these writers. Maybe, like Anne Enright, they knew that ‘When kids come, something happens, which is that gender isn’t a game anymore. It’s easy to be equal when there are no kids. But when a kid comes along, the shit literally hits the fan’ (Enright, 2014). I didn’t give it much thought at the time. I knew I was reading fluff and I felt somewhat guilty about not attempting harder novels – I even took *Jude the Obscure* off the shelf a few times, but as a mother of several small children I found the book had lost its appeal.

By 2009 I was reading again. I had just graduated with a BA in English Literature and was trying to make up for lost time. I felt like John Williams’ Stoner:

Having come to his studies late, he felt the urgency of study. Sometimes, immersed in his books, there would come to him the awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read... he realised the little time he had in life to read so much, to learn what he had to know.
(Williams, 2012, p.25)

I was reading seminal feminist works by Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan and biographies such as *In Sacred Loneliness* by Todd Compton and *Mormon Enigma* by Linda K. Newell and Valeen T.

Avery which document the lives of the Mormon women who were written out of the Church's founding narratives. I hoped that my reading would help me discover whether, having digested the unvarnished history of Mormonism, I could remain a member of the Church, and whether I was a feminist. At the same time, I was reading fiction by Carol Shields, Ali Smith and Alice Munro, and wrestling with a third, and possibly more difficult question: could I write? I had been plodding through an Open University workbook, completing writing exercise after writing exercise, but I was finding it difficult to write a whole story – what did I have to say?

I wanted to write about home and family, things that interested me. The writers I admired borrowed things from real life. Margaret Atwood described how writerly methods 'resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests' (Atwood, 2003, xviii), while Chuck Palahniuk also linked real life events with fiction as he maintained: 'This is why I write. Because most times, your life isn't funny the first time through. Most times, you can hardly stand it' (Palahniuk, 2004, p.204). I began to see how both the 'shiny bits' and the things I could 'hardly stand' might be invested in the bank of memory and eventually mature into fiction.

Around this time I tentatively imagined a short story about an awkward moment between a mother and daughter. The story was to be based on a real interaction with my daughter who was four years old and had begun to look at me through narrowed, judging eyes. One day she asked whether she could attend her swimming lesson wearing an old pair of her brother's trunks. I said yes, but when faced with the crowd of girls in frilly princess costumes and bikinis, she changed her mind and, in the absence of a back-up costume, started to cry. I ended up kneeling on the poolside, in a puddle. My jeans gaped, flashing the back of my knickers at the parents of the other children as they sat behind me on plastic chairs, like a jury. I extended my hand, it was a conciliatory gesture, but my daughter flinched. As if she was expecting to be hit. I was appalled. I'd embarked on the trip to the pool full of the lurching optimism that came in waves after I stopped being a Mormon. *No gender stereotyping for me!* I thought. *No sexualising of a four year old girl's torso on my watch! Respecting personal autonomy is the key to successful parenting!* There was something awful in that confrontation with my daughter. We were both exposed – she physically, half-naked and cowering, me as an inadequate parent, having set her up for disappointment by insisting that she could do whatever boys did. I felt I'd forced her into it, even though it wasn't my idea.

I admitted defeat and we returned to the changing room. She sat on the bench in the cubicle while I dried her feet. Her little toes looked like peanuts and, as I dried them, I wondered whether she would like me again one day or if her growing up years were destined to be punctuated by a series of unavoidable hurts and misunderstandings. I had never talked about these kinds of experiences, never read about them and I didn't know how to go about fictionalising them. Then I read Helen Simpson.

*

In Simpson's story 'Café Society' which forms part of her critically acclaimed collection *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life*, two women, Frances and Sally, meet for coffee and attempt to chat while Sally's son Ben interrupts. Neither woman is able to speak for long enough to express anything that lies under the surface: 'We're so lucky,' they agree, po-faced, glum' (Simpson, 2001, p.17). At the conclusion of the story Simpson writes, 'It's important to put up a decent apologia for your life; well, it is to other people, mostly; to come up with a convincing defence, to argue your corner... and if you can't, or won't, you will be shunned' (Simpson, 2001, p.19). I felt like these women when, having embarked on a Creative Writing MA, I first discovered Simpson's writing. I had been struggling to put up a decent apologia for my life and, like the title story's Dorrie, I wasn't sure how my family would function as I allowed myself want things again: 'Give me an inch and I'd run a mile,' Dorrie confesses (Simpson, 2001, p.39). I wasn't worried about running; but I wanted that extra inch, and I planned to fill it with reading, and eventually, writing.

Simpson's stories were full of exquisite descriptions of the everyday; the mothers lived 'under a cloud' inside their clothes, 'blue-veined as cheese, blueish-white as milk,' a crying child was 'a small combustion engine, full of distress,' and an assured teenager was certain that she would never feel 'dead inside or live somewhere boring' (Simpson, 2001, p.149, p.8, p.3). This collection expressed so many of the things that I had felt, but never had the bravery or ability to put into words. I grew up in a community in which men, referred to as *prophets, seers and revelators*, repeatedly insisted that motherhood should be both the sole focus, and single most rewarding experience, of a woman's existence. Mormon prophet, Spencer W. Kimball maintained:

The most sacred privileges that a woman could have are in the home, to be a partner with God in the creation of children. Mothers should be home to teach and train and receive and love their children into security. This divine service of motherhood can be rendered only by mothers. It may not be passed to others... Being a good wife and mother and sweetheart is career enough for any woman.
(Kimball in Scott, 2005, p.280)

Admissions of maternal ambivalence were tacitly prohibited – complaints or concerns about the divine role of women were seen as a challenge to the authority of the prophet, God's mouthpiece on earth. Having spent years squelching my complaints and concerns, I found Simpson's impious and sharply humorous treatment of parenthood and gender expectations deliciously transgressive.

Parenthood is, to purloin Dickens, the best of times and the worst of times. Simpson expertly captures moments of delight and despair; as she notes, parents can 'be very happy and very miserable at the same time' (Simpson in Crown, 2012). The title story follows Dorrie's day, from an 'early morning garden' to 'a midnight kitchen' (Simpson, 2001, p.20, p.56). When little Robin slips into his parents' bed in the early hours Dorrie studies him, observing that his chest is 'like a huge warm baroque pearl,' his eyes are 'guileless, unguarded and intent' and his face is set in a 'little beatific smile' (Simpson, 2001, p.21). This 'Hallmark moment' is weighed against less palatable realities;

from the censure of other mothers at the school gates: ‘... you give up your time to your children, not to primping yourself up,’ to the judgement of Dorrie’s husband, Max: ‘She was starting to get a double chin, he reflected wrathfully; she had allowed herself to put on more weight. Here he was on his wedding anniversary sitting opposite a fat woman’ (Simpson, 2001, p. 34, p. 49).

Rebecca Steinitz, writing in the *Women’s Review of Books* described the world of these stories as ‘claustrophobic and often depressing,’ however, she praised Simpson’s ‘impeccable eye for social and psychological detail, a refreshingly unpredictable imagination and some beautiful writing’ (Steinitz, 2001, p.19). After I finished *Hey yeah right, get a life* I read Simpson’s other collections and then I read interviews with Simpson, noticing that she was frequently called upon to defend domestic fiction. ‘That domesticity word is politically loaded. It’s used to describe something as tame or boring. It’s anything but,’ she said in a 2010 interview (Simpson in Jamieson, 2010). Again, in 2010 she noted, ‘It does seem ridiculous that describing domestic work and life – the daily reality of most women in the world – is seen as letting the side down’ (Simpson in Crown, 2010).

In 1999 the Chair of the Orange Prize judges Lola Young complained of entries that ‘tended towards the domestic in a piddling sort of way, which is very British’ (Young in Gibbons, 1999) and in 2007 Orange Prize judge Muriel Gray expanded on this theme in a Guardian Books blog titled ‘Women Authors Must Drop Domestic Themes’:

It’s hard to ignore the sheer volume of thinly disguised autobiographical writing from women on small-scale domestic themes such as motherhood, boyfriend troubles and tiny family dramas. These writers appear to have forgotten the fundamental imperative of fiction writing. It’s called making stuff up.
(Gray, 2007)

In relegating motherhood to a ‘small-scale domestic theme’ Gray failed to account for novels such as Carol Shields’s Booker nominated *Unless* which revolves around a mother/daughter relationship without being ‘small-scale’. As to the imperative of fiction, Gray appears to be dismissing works like ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ by Charlotte Gilman or Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, both of which have some basis in autobiography. If the standard of submissions for the 2007 Orange Prize was particularly weak¹, Gray’s attack might have been better directed at the quality of the work, as opposed to its subject matter. Instead, Gray insisted that women must ‘work hard’ to ‘escape from their own gender and circumstances’ (Gray in Feay, 2007). Must male writers also work hard to escape from their gender and circumstances? Not really, it seems: they share houses with women, father children, get dressed in the mornings, and yet these life-trappings aren’t seen as *circumstances* that must be

¹ It is difficult to believe that this was the case - the 2007 longlist included Margaret Forster (winner of the J.R Ackerley Prize, the Fawcett Society Book Prize and the Heinemann Award), Anne Tyler (Pulitzer Prize-winner) and Rachel Cusk (winner of the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Somerset Maugham Award); writers whose work is hardly ‘small-scale’.

escaped: Kate Mosse noted, ‘...when men write about domesticity, it's seen as great literature. When women do it, it's seen as women's issues’ (Mosse in Akbar, 2011). Carol Shields agreed. Alex Ramon noted her ‘increasingly overt’ responses to ‘gender prejudice’ in his book *Liminal Spaces: The double art of Carol Shields*: ‘now that men are writing so-called domestic novels they are not called [domestic] at all; they are called sensitive ... reflections of modern life’; ‘[w]hen men write about ‘ordinary people’ they are thought to be subtle and sensitive, when women do so their novels are classed as domestic’ (Ramon, 2008, p.12).

When Shields wrote about ‘ordinary people’ she was doing something skilful and noteworthy. Blake Morrison said Shields examined ‘ordinary lives, domestic situations... [finding] the significance in them. She makes them seem, if not exotic, then full of interest and extraordinary in their way’ (Morrison, 2003). Shields described her bewilderment at the propensity for some writers to spurn domestic detail, as follows:

I had been puzzled by the fact that people in novels rarely sat down to read a book. Or to tell each other stories. Nor did they seem to have friends. Or birthdays. Or any semblance of a domestic life, no beds, brooms, wallpaper, cereal bowls, cousins, buses, local elections, newspapers, head colds, cramps, or moments when their heads were empty, at ease, happy even. Why had domesticity, that shaggy beast that eats up ninety percent of our lives, been shoved aside by fiction writers?
(Shields in Ramon, 2008, p.9)

There appears to be a sense that domestic detail trivialises ‘serious’ fiction, but rather than trivialising it, I would argue that such detail humanises fiction. This criticism of the domestic indicates a lack of interest in, and an undervaluing of the lives of women and in particular, mothers.

In *Mother Without Child*, a text that situates the maternal as a site of physic and social division rather than a core identity, Elaine Hansen examines contemporary fiction and the crisis of motherhood. Hansen notes that an early, enduring question of feminist literary criticism has been whether ‘mothers can write, or whether writers can be mothers’ (Hansen, 1997, p.11). The answer to both questions is yes, as is evidenced by writers such as Margaret Atwood, Carols Shield, Helen Simpson, Alice Munro, Margaret Forster etc., but historically it has been challenging. As Margaret Atwood noted:

A male artist could have marriage and children on the side, as long as he didn't let them get in the way – a faint hope according to James, Connolly et al. – but for women, such things were supposed to *be* the way. And so this particular way must be renounced altogether by the female artist, in order to clear the way for that other way – the way of Art... You couldn't be a wife and mother and also an artist, because each one of these things required total dedication.
(Atwood, 2003, p.73, 74)

In a review of *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, Irish novelist Joseph O'Neill observed that motherhood was particularly fraught with difficulties for the last, pre-feminist generation of writers: ‘we see that Penelope Fitzgerald, a mother of three, did not publish until the age of 58, that Iris Murdoch and

Flannery O'Connor and Patricia Highsmith were childless. Spark may not have been alone in associating motherhood with artistic and personal annihilation' (O'Neill, 2010). O'Neill's statement implies that writers such as Murdoch may have chosen to remain childless as a result of a 'motherhood vs writing' dichotomy. However, Martin Amis suggested that Murdoch's childlessness was a result of pragmatism and preference:

One of the unforeseen benefits of having children is that it delivers you from your own childishness: there's no going back. John and Iris, naturally, did not toy long with the idea of becoming parents; it was themselves they wished to nurture.
(Amis, 2001)

Doris Lessing is another of this generation of writers whose mothering is much discussed. In a *Telegraph* article titled 'Doris Lessing, a mother much misunderstood' Peter Stanford quoted Lessing: "I haven't yet met a woman," she wrote in October 1947, "who isn't bitterly rebellious, wanting children, but resenting them because of the way we are cribbed, cabined and confined" (Stanford 2013). Comments such as these make it easy for Lessing to be portrayed as the archetypal bad mother. She is said to have 'neglected' her first two children, when in actual fact she was forbidden from seeing them for a year; in such circumstances, she noted, 'it is difficult to see what else I could do but neglect them' (Stanford, 2013). And she certainly did not 'abandon' her third son, Peter, in order to be a writer.

It was a fact that she chose never to broadcast. Indeed, she seemed to prefer to say the opposite, as if playing up to the role she had been allotted of neglectful mother. "No one can write with a child around," she once pronounced. "It's no good. You just get cross." Yet in that first decade in London, looking after Peter as a single mother, she still managed to produce five novels, two collections of short stories, a memoir and various plays.
(Stanford, 2013)

There were clearly difficulties for these writers but the choice to ignore the complexities of their individual circumstances and the casting of those women who left the lion's share of child-rearing to husbands or extended family members as 'abandoners' and 'bad mothers' is yet another way to question women's ability to work and mother.

Although it is clear that writers *can* be mothers, women² are still subject to such questions today. Maggie O'Farrell revealed that while pregnant she was approached by several people who, somewhat gleefully, remarked that every baby costs a book. In a 2003 Guardian article titled 'Is the Pram in the Hallway the Enemy of Good Art?' O'Farrell asked female writers whether they believed that their children had 'cost' them books:

² And not just mothers. As recently as 2011 VS Naipaul's described women's writing as 'quite different,' and insisted, 'I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me' (Naipaul in Fallon, 2011).

Amanda Craig, who has more novels than children to her name, instantly denounces the baby-costing-a-book theory as ‘Bosh... I strongly object to babies or children being blamed for lack of productivity.’ Poet Ruth Padel goes further: ‘A baby can be a catalyst. Anything that deepens your experience deepens writing.’ Emily Perkins refuses to think of children in terms of their cost. ‘You may as well say that every love affair costs you a book, or every time you move house, whoops, there goes a chapter – it’s a meaningless equation.’ (O’Farrell, 2003)

As Carol Shields noted, ‘It seems to me that someone who is a parent and thus witness to the development of character is uniquely suited to be a novelist, just as an equal partner in a marriage has a window on another gender.’ (Hollenberg & Shields 1998, p.343). In fact, Shields maintained that motherhood actually enriched her life as a writer: ‘This must have affected my writing: certainly motherhood “assigned” me a subject: families, interconnections, growth, separation, birth, death’ (Hollenberg & Shields, 1998, p.344). In an essay titled ‘A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children’ in her collection *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Alice Walker went one step further as she discussed the work of Buchi Emecheta, claiming Emecheta ‘is a writer and a mother, and it is *because she is both* that she writes at all’ (Walker, 2011, my italics). Although Walker stated a personal preference for ‘an absolutely quiet and private place to work’ she noted that some women, such as Emecheta, must out of necessity integrate ‘the profession of writer into the cultural concept³ of mother/worker’ and Walker questioned the way in which ‘our culture separates the duties of raising children from those of creative work’ (Walker, 2011).

Reading interviews and essays by women writers made me realise that their lives were not entirely dissimilar from mine and I eagerly followed any references they made, like breadcrumbs. I read Tillie Olsen’s short story ‘I Stand Here Ironing’ after Shields mentioned Olsen in an interview. I found Olson’s descriptions of domestic routines compelling:

Mornings of crisis and near hysteria trying to get lunches packed, hair combed, coats and shoes found, everyone to school or Child Care on time, the baby ready for transportation. And always the paper scribbled on by a smaller one, the book looked at by Susan then mislaid, the homework not done.
(Olsen, 1956, p.5)

But what I loved most, was the way Olson depicted maternal ambivalence:

She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister was all that she was not. She did not like me to touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much in her and probably nothing will come of it.
(Olsen, 1956, p.7)

³ Walker is referring to Ibo society here.

I was moved by this expression of love and regret, this description of motherhood as something demanding and difficult.

Elaine Hansen quoted from a special edition of 'Signs' on "Mothering and Patriarchy" as she claimed that too often motherhood has been reduced to sentimentalised, idealised tropes: 'endlessly loving, serenely healing, emotionally rewarding,' these are tropes that have no counterpart in a 'political and social reality where the labor of caring is devalued, unsupported, and unseen, and where mothers are more likely to be endlessly burdened, anxious, and blamed' (Hansen, 1997, p.18). The sentimentalisation and glorification of motherhood can also contribute to the discounting of the potential rewards and burdens of fatherhood. In a *Guardian* piece about fatherhood and writing Hari Kunzru stated:

Every young writer remembers Cyril Connolly's doom-laden pronouncement in *Enemies of Promise* that 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall'.... It's an idea that has given a license to generations of male writers to behave – not to put too fine a point on it – like assholes. Moreover, it's blind to the idea that being a father, with its intense, earth-shattering experience of love, could ever provide material for art. (Kunzru, 2013)

Like many women writers before him, Kunzru went on to discuss the ways in which being a parent may enrich one's writing.

I admired the writers who challenged reductive, sentimental views of motherhood. I warmed to Marion in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* as she observed her married, repeatedly pregnant friend Clara subsiding into a 'grim but inert fatalism. Her metaphors for her children included barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock' (Atwood, 1980, p.36). I empathised with Juliet in Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*:

The time she realised that if she didn't go and buy food herself there would be none in the house; the time Benedict returned to work a week after Barnaby's birth and she realised she would be looking after him alone; the countless times a domestic task had fallen to her, so that she became experienced and preferred to do it because it was easier than asking Benedict – it was all surprising to her, outrageous almost. With her sense of justice she expected that at some point the outrage would be detected and addressed, but of course it was not. (Cusk, 2006, p.37).

I read about maternal ambivalence with a strange kind of glee – when I interacted with other mothers, I was frustrated by the vital lies that laced their conversations, the withholding and the tempering of feelings, the tentative, so-far-and-no-further admissions of tiredness and ire – the glee I felt as I read wasn't the kind that is described in Cusk's *Arlington Park* when the aforementioned Juliet makes the mistake of confiding in her mother: 'Oh the joy, the harsh, vitriolic joy in her mother's face! She could almost hear her mother thinking, that's showed you'; it was more a feeling of, 'Finally! I understand – me too' (Cusk, 2006, p.37).

As I read Tessa Hadley's *Clever Girl* I empathised with Stella's occasional need to leave her sons with her mother for days at a time. Her attachment to the children was elastic, each time she escaped it inexorably pulled her back, sometimes in the middle of the night: 'I felt relief, falling asleep at last. I wasn't free, I was fastened to my children. At some point in the night I woke to Luke's scrutiny, bent close over me. – Mum's back, he said to himself in mild surprise, as if he saw the funny side of the whole thing' (Hadley, 2014, p.225). I read Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years* (recommended to me, thus: 'if you love Carol Shields, you'll love Anne Tyler') and I was simultaneously appalled and electrified by Delia's sudden abandonment of her family: would she go back? Did I *want* her to go back? I wasn't sure. I found the novel's conclusion unexpected and profoundly moving:

Now she saw that June beach scene differently. Her three children, she saw, had been staring at the horizon with the alert, tensed stillness of explorers at the ocean's edge, poised to begin their journeys. And Delia, shading her eyes in the distance, had been trying to understand why they were leaving.

Where they were going without her.

How to say goodbye.

(Tyler, 1996, p.326)

Delia's temporary abandonment of her family doesn't appear to cause irreparable harm, perhaps this is why I was so keen for her to get away with it. Having said that, I also empathised with Eva in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, despite the fact that her maternal misjudgements are not so easily forgiven. From the first, Shriver's novel didn't strike me as a book about either violence or the mentality that leads to high school massacres; it seemed to be an examination of motherhood and mothering from a macro and micro perspective, a novel that questioned both individual and societal expectations. In a Salon interview with Suzy Hansen, Shriver stated: 'Ultimately, what's at the core of the book is not Columbine and that phenomenon. The center subject matter is motherhood' (Shriver in Hansen, 2003).

Shriver's description of motherhood is chillingly apposite: 'Having a baby is like leaving the back door unlocked. Anyone could walk in' (Shriver in Woods, 2011). Her own words echo those she gives to Eva: '... just about any stranger could have turned up nine months later. We might as well have left the door unlocked' (Shriver, 2003, p.60). These statements are deliberately provocative, as is Shriver's novel: 'It's a worst case scenario,' she admits. 'The book is at bottom a need to examine the whole gamut of possible consequences of having children. Yes, it's an extreme case, and it's meant to be an extreme case' (Shriver in Hansen, 2003). When Eva learns she is pregnant she feels faint and is instructed to drop her head between her knees; looking back, she sees this moment as her 'introduction to the way in which, crossing the threshold of motherhood, suddenly you become social property, the animate equivalent of a public park (Shriver, 2003, p. 62). Later, on the same day, Eva is frustrated by Franklin's reluctance to have sex in case it hurts the baby and by the fact that she can no longer drink alcohol: 'I did not care about being deprived of a glass of wine per se. But like that

legendary journey that begins with a single step, I had already embarked upon my first resentment' (Shriver, 2003, p. 64). The events of that day set the tone for Eva's experience of pregnancy and motherhood; she feels invaded and abased.

In his review of the film of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, critic Peter Bradshaw appeared to express sympathy for Eva, asking, 'What does an independent-minded, career woman do when she is landed with a nasty little boy, precisely the kind of smug competitive male she has spent her whole life trying to subdue and surpass?' (Bradshaw, 2011). I too was inclined to feel for Eva, but when I mentioned this to a friend her vigorous response surprised me: 'How can you say that?' she asked. 'Eva was such an *awful* mother – it's all her fault.' I disagree, however even those who feel kindly towards Eva are left with this uncomfortable thought, expressed by Bradshaw: 'Nature or nurture? A mother supplies both' (Bradshaw, 2011).

Even when a mother doesn't supply both – as with Penelope in Margaret Forster's *Private Papers*, mother of four daughters, three biological, one adopted – she is first in line for censure when things go wrong. Orphaned Penelope's one ambition is to have a family: 'My idea of happiness was to have a family, with all its onerous ties and responsibilities, to which to belong' (Forster, 1987, p.11). The private papers of the title are Penelope's; she is writing a history of her family. Enter oldest daughter Rosemary who reads, disputes and corrects her mother's history, providing the novel with not one, but two unreliable narrators. Initially, Penelope is the more sympathetic, perhaps because she, at least, is creating something, whereas Rosemary is, in Forster's words 'trying to... just interrupt and straighten things' (Forster, 1999). Rosemary considers Penelope to be particularly at fault for her adoption of orphaned Jess and she makes the following claims, which cannot be countered as Jess is dead:

Mother's hunger to have her revolted her. She would rather have been someone's special adopted child, someone who had no children of her own. She thought Mother had been greedy and that there was something suspicious about her desire to take on another child.
(Forster, 1987, p.28)

While Shriver's Eva doesn't want motherhood enough, Forster's Penelope wants it too much, and both sins, it seems, must be punished. Penelope's love for Jess is intent and anxious. She treasures the clothes that belonged to Jess's dead mother and presents them to Jess, in what she imagines is a demonstration of love and respect for Jess's history. But Rosemary describes the presentation of the clothes thus: 'what shocked poor Jess was the poverty those clothes symbolized... Jess wouldn't touch them, of course. She said she wanted everything burned, they gave her the creeps' (Forster, 1987, p.27). Despite Penelope's love and care, Jess dies. In fact, in various ways, all four of Penelope's children disappoint her. When asked about Penelope's disappointment, in a BBC Radio 4 Book Club discussion, Forster responded:

I think any woman who has a baby and goes through that nine months and goes through that whole childbirth thing and then, when she sees the baby – you can't ever imagine not being passionately close to it and passionately in love with it, because it is of you, and how could this happen? So when it does happen, women, on the whole, can't believe it.
(Forster, 1999)

Forster went on to say the following about motherhood:

You start off with such tremendously high hopes and what you're going to do is, you're going to put right whatever was wrong with your relationship with your own mother and then, when you start to have the relationship with your daughters, it's different things that go wrong – or you feel that it's different things, and, of course, it's adolescence that explodes the whole thing. It's the family trap, isn't it?
(Forster, 1999)

The family trap. As I read more fiction about motherhood and family, I began to see why so many happily-ever-afters were arrived at *before* the characters had children. It was a way of avoiding the endless questions about what comes next: what is allowed and what is forbidden, what constitutes success and what amounts to failure, what must be sacrificed and what may be kept, what is good and what is bad?

In *Mother Without Child*, Hansen writes, 'The challenge of mothering seems to be not how to be 'good enough,' but to dare to believe in our goodness enough to also be 'bad enough'... the role of bad mother is, in fact, empowering' (Hansen, 1997, p.10). When collecting and editing fairy tales the Grimm brothers decided to remove bad mothers, changing the biological mothers of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel to step-mothers. It has been suggested that the Grimms made the changes in later editions because they 'held motherhood sacred' (Flood, 2014). Of course, we are understandably repulsed and discomfited by stories of mothers who do their children serious harm, but nowadays the label of 'bad mother' is doled out to all kinds of women; those who fail to feed their children enough *and* those who feed them too much; those who let their children roam free *and* those who adopt a helicopter approach. Women are criticised for working: 'Working mothers risk damaging their child's prospects'⁴ and simultaneously warned of the dangers of keeping their children at home: 'Going to nursery linked to higher GCSE grades and pay.'⁵ And if women dare to admit uncertainty, their fitness to parent is questioned: 'Bad Mom? New York's first lady savaged for admitting ambivalence over kids'.⁶

One way to respond to this no-win situation, this *trap*, is to laugh at it. In a *New York Times* opinion piece Heather Havrilesky, author of memoir *Disaster Preparedness*, writes, 'It used to be

⁴ Steve Dougherty, *Daily Mail* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-30342/Working-mothers-risk-damaging-childs-prospects.html>

⁵ Helen Ward *TES* <https://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2014/09/09/going-to-nursery-helps-children-get-better-gcse-grades-study-finds.aspx>

⁶ Howard Kurtz Fox News <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/05/22/bad-mom-new-yorks-first-lady-savaged-for-admitting-ambivalence-over-kids/>

good enough just to keep your house from being coated in a thin layer of dog hair and human feces. No longer... Today's absurdly conflicting notions of motherhood play far better as comedy' (Havrilesky, 2014). Perhaps another response is to challenge sentimentalised, idealised tropes by writing fiction about less than perfect mothers. Not long after my short story collection was published a poet friend asked whether, as I was ordering the stories, I had considered how the closing image of one interacted with the opening image of the next. I hadn't. I worried about it for a moment and then something occurred to me: the collection opened and closed with the same image; a mother on her knees.

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Poet and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams' memoir *When Women Were Birds* was described as 'a lyrical and elliptical meditation on women, nature, family, and history' in *The Boston Globe*. In the memoir, Williams describes how, as her mother lay dying, she said, 'I am leaving you all my journals... but you must promise me that you will not look at them until after I am gone' (Williams, 2012, p.1). After her mother died, Williams discovered three shelves of clothbound journals. 'The spines of each were perfectly aligned against the lip of the shelves,' she wrote. 'I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. I opened the third. It, too was empty, as was the fourth, the fifth, the sixth' (Williams, 2012, p.2). All her mother's journals were blank. The blow of the empty journals was like 'a second death' to Williams who described her own journal keeping as a way of experiencing each encounter in life twice: 'once in the world, and once again on the page' (Williams, 2012, p.15, p.33). I was mystified and disturbed by Williams' mother's silent cruelty.

The first time I met my agent we talked about novels, despite the fact that I was intent on writing short stories. She asked what interested me. 'Transgressive mothers,' I replied, much to my own surprise. We talked about mothers in fiction and she recommended some novels. I went away and stubbornly continued working on my collection. When I finally began to write *A Song for Issy Bradley* I envisaged a mother who exercises control by retreating into silence.

In a piece of research in *Gender and Society* titled 'Higher Education and the Negotiated Process of Hegemony: Embedded Resistance among Mormon Women,' young, single, Mormon women were interviewed by researchers who were investigating the ways in which women who participate in conservative and patriarchal religions simultaneously 'resist and contest gender regulation in creative ways' (Mihelich, Storrs, 2003, p. 406). Mormon gender roles are extremely proscriptive, despite occasional institutional protestations to the contrary. As recently as 2006, one of the Church's General Authorities (senior clergy) made the following statement:

It doesn't take expensive perfume to make a lady, but it does require cleanliness, modesty, self-respect, and pride in one's appearance.... Every man has the right to be married to a woman who makes herself as beautiful as she can be and who looks in the mirror to tidy

herself up before he comes home... A husband should hurry home because of the angel who awaits him, and that angel should be watching the clock awaiting his arrival.
(Callister, 2006)

In Mihelich and Storrs' study the interviewees believed that motherhood was their primary role in the future. They portrayed motherhood as 'profoundly important, fun, interesting, and a source of personal fulfilment... they had little day-to-day experience with mothering, which explained their lack of recognition that mothering can be a source of subordination, depression, anxiety and hardship' (Mihelich, Storrs, 2003, p.411). They didn't yet know that motherhood offers women 'a site of both power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement' (Hansen, 1997, p.3). During the course of the research Mihelich and Storrs discovered that these women contested gender regulation in creative ways despite the fact that they were 'not motivated by a consciously articulated resistance'. This phenomena is called 'embedded resistance' (Mihelich, Storrs, 2003, p.419).

It is difficult to stop being a Mormon. 'The LDS [Mormon] nomos is a complex belief system that provides believers with a sense of orderliness, a system of behavioural guidelines, and a sense of meaning. Due to the compelling human need for meaning, separation from the security of the nomos constitutes a "powerful threat to the individual" (Berger 1990, 21)' (Mihelich, Storrs, 2003, p.405). Creative or 'embedded resistance' can, for a time at least, be a less disruptive coping-mechanism.

When I began to write *A Song for Issy Bradley* I imagined a mother who wouldn't dream of separating herself from Mormonism. I did not want Claire Bradley to leave the church, I didn't want her narrative arc to mirror my own – I felt that an overtly autobiographical novel might be hurtful to my extended family and I didn't, and don't, feel I have either the requisite skill or distance from the material to write one. Instead, I wanted Claire Bradley to choose a passive opposition, the kind of resistance a woman in her position might reasonably be expected to adopt. I saw such a passive resistance and silence at work in Carol Shields' *Unless*, a novel that 'discovers the tragedy that lies on the other side of silence but offers the condolence of comedy as it debates the eternal struggle between good and evil, hope and despair' (Stovel, 2006, p.72). When nineteen year old Norah drops out of university and decides to spend her days sitting on a street corner with a sign that reads GOODNESS her mother Reta is bewildered and angry. As she tries to work out what has happened to Norah, Reta writes a series of bitterly funny letters addressed to men, highlighting the ways in which women are marginalised and silenced. Reta's friends and family postulate explanations for Norah's behaviour. Fictional writer Danielle Westerman, whose memoirs Reta is supposed to be translating, believes that 'Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety' (Shields, 2003, p.104). This idea of impotent piety interested me – it still does. Why would anyone choose such a quiet, *I-hate-to-make-a-fuss* form of resistance? Danielle Westerman, with her adamant certainty suggests: 'Subversion of society is possible for a mere few; *inversion* is more commonly the tactic for the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic' (Shields, 2003, p.218).

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Once I knew the story of my novel, I had to decide how to tell it. I read novels about families as I thought about form. When I read *The Poisonwood Bible* I was struck by the similarities between it and *Little Women*. Kingsolver acknowledges the similarities on her website: ‘Certainly I considered that other famous family as I was writing this. It was one of the most beloved books of my childhood’ (Kingsolver, 2014). The March and Price families are religious, both have four daughters, both deal with the death of a daughter and each novel follows the daughters as they transition from ‘practising homemaking as daughters to producing domesticity as wives and mothers’ (Jacobsen, 2005, p.107). There are however, some striking differences; *Little Women* is set in new England, during and after the American Civil War, while *The Poisonwood Bible* is set in the Belgian Congo, Atlanta and South Africa between 1959 and 1998; Mrs March is exemplary, but Orleanna Price is doubtful and conflicted; war hero and chaplain Mr March is a (largely absent) benevolent presence, while Nathan Price is a religious fanatic and a danger to his family. The two novels also reach very different conclusions:

Little Women ends triumphantly with fall harvest, where Mrs. March symbolically reaps the fruits of her parenting. The final tableau of her three surviving daughters’ happy marriages celebrates Mrs. March’s successful reproduction of American domesticity. At the conclusion Mrs. March sees her married daughters and exclaims that she can wish for them “no greater happiness than this!” (p.502). While the Price women share this goal for a secure home, they are ultimately less successful in fulfilling it. *The Poisonwood Bible* does not repeat *Little Women*’s happy family tableau. In fact, Orleanna asks at the novel’s outset: “What do we know, even now? Ask the children. Look at what they grew up to be” (p.10). Orleanna’s children are scattered and her knowledge is uncertain. (Jacobson, 2005, p.108)

I found *The Poisonwood Bible* sharp and challenging. I thought that perhaps this had something to do with the way Kingsolver chose to tell the story:

Unlike *Little Women*, *The Poisonwood Bible* does not have an omniscient narrator. All the Price women take turns narrating the events. The novel’s structure promotes narrative and ideological instabilities because different voices with distinct perspectives narrate the same incidents. (Jacobson, 2005, p.107).

I liked Kingsolver’s multiple viewpoints, they worked alongside the African vistas to give the novel a capaciousness which gave me, as the reader, scope to contemplate the trustworthiness of each of the Price women. If multiple viewpoints served to promote ‘narrative and ideological instabilities’ it seemed that I might benefit from employing them in my novel. However, I knew that I didn’t want to write a series of first person narratives. I wanted the closeness of first person, but I also wanted the flexibility of third, and so I decided to use free indirect discourse, allowing my narrative to ‘slide in and out of a character’s consciousness, maintaining an ironic distance’ (Cox, 2004, p.43). I noticed

the way Alice Munro did this in her short stories and I admired the way she was able to reveal ‘what is thought but never spoken out loud’ (Cox, 2004, p.45). Daniel Menaker, senior editor at *The New Yorker* for twenty years wrote of Munro:

One of the very modern and unconventional things she does in almost all of her stories is to write about the way people narrate events. For example, first she will give the report of something that somebody hears. Then she will tell the story that someone tells about hearing that report. Then Alice will tell the story of hearing that report....Often it seems as if sets of curtains are being parted one after another, revealing stories within stories – and varying versions of stories – often being told in different voices, all of which, taken together, enables the reader to apprehend different constructions of roughly the same events.
(Menaker, 2006)

The idea of showing something once and then having a different character retell it or shed some new light on it – this *parting of curtains* – appealed to me and I planned to show varying versions of some of my novel’s most significant scenes.

As I developed five, third person voices, I reread *The Accidental* by Ali Smith and was once again struck by her expert use of free indirect speech. I loved the way the novel kaleidoscoped around the Smart family, using a third person that was so close there were times when it felt as if I was reading first person. In a *Guardian* review Steven Poole described the book as ‘a skilful exercise in free indirect style: the characters are not first-person narrators, but lovingly distinguished third-person points of view’ (Poole, 2005). I particularly admired twelve year old Astrid’s voice and the way Smith revealed her thoughts and feelings through seemingly casual observations and digressions.

She stands in this garden with all its old trees and bushes and all the fields and woods that go on and on beyond the house. She is not being disturbing in any way. Compared to those trees round the summerhouse she is the kind of meaningless tree that gets planted in the grassy areas of the car parks of supermarkets.
(Smith, 2005)

My prose wasn’t nearly as expert as Smith’s, but as I wrote I found that having multiple viewpoints allowed me to balance Alma Bradley’s cynicism with his father’s faith and to contrast Zippy Bradley’s hope with her mother’s depression. I was also able to show varying degrees of orthodoxy in a religious community that I knew would be largely unfamiliar to the majority of readers. I practised and practised. When I showed one of Alma Bradley’s scenes to a tutor during a writing retreat, he sucked his breath through his teeth.

‘What?’ I asked, worried that I had made an awful mistake. ‘Have I used the wrong word?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘it’s worse than that. You’ve got narrative bleed.’ He made the diagnosis with great sadness, and then he picked up a pen and started crossing sentences out, staunching my narrative haemorrhage with neutral prose.

I ignored his advice and persevered with a close third person narrative. It seemed right for the characters and right for a novel about God and death. As Smith wrote in her aptly named story ‘The

Third Person’ – ‘The third person is another pair of eyes. The third person is a presentiment of God. The third person is a way to tell the story. The third person is a revitalisation of the dead’ (Smith, 2009, p.55).

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Carol Shields is widely credited with saying, ‘Write the book you want to read, the one you cannot find.’ Although I haven’t been able to find the original source of the quotation, in a CBC recording Shields’ daughter, Anne Giardini, makes a similar claim: ‘My mother was a believer in telling stories that she couldn’t read anywhere else. In the absence of those stories, she began to write them herself’ (Giardini, 2002). When I started writing *A Song for Issy Bradley* I’d never read a novel about a British, Mormon family; I’d never seen people like me depicted in fiction. I hoped to write the kind of book I’d like to read. Although I consider myself to be a feminist, I didn’t have a sense of my novel as a feminist work, and I did not mention feminism or feminist literature in earlier drafts of my poetics. It wasn’t that I felt feminism was irrelevant, I agree with literary critic Phyllis Rose’s observation that ‘the burden of family is now the central issue of women and creativity, whether the creativity is expressed in novels or interior design schemes, litigation or business plans, cupcakes or algorithms’ (Rose, 2014). However, my initial feelings of excitement as I read Greer and Friedan turned to uncertainty when I studied articles about third and fourth wave feminism and intersectionality. I began to worry that I might get feminism *wrong*.

Patricia Yaeger called for feminist writing that avoids the ‘too-anxious ablutions of postmodern feminists so busy cleaning up each other’s acts that they fail to see the mess and pollution lingering around the kitchen sinks of women still caught in the travails of a pre-postmodern world’ (Yaeger, 1994, p.7). She confessed to a longing for ‘dirty texts,’ for writing that is ‘improper, unclean, illogical, politically suspect, full of raunchy anecdotes and abortive logic’ a writing that is ‘open to mistakes and blind spots’ (Yaegar, 1994, p.7, p.14). I imagine that many of the improper, unclean, aspects of the writing Yaegar described materialise when writers choose to depict ‘the dramas that happen behind the kitchen sink’ (Yaegar, 1994, p.22).

In a collection of essays, *Dropped Threads: What We Aren’t Told*, edited by Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson, women write about life experiences they found disappointing or surprising. Anderson and Shields decided to compile the collection after realising that there were things about women’s lives that went unsaid. Anderson explained:

The woman’s network let me down. Nothing I’ve ever heard or read prepared me for this!’ This particular yelp resulted from the plummet of energy and purpose I experienced with menopause and quickly led us to wider, more lively musings on what else had caught us unprepared, where else we had experienced gaps between female experience and expression. We were surprised by the number of topics and by the ease with which they came to mind. The image of dropped threads from the fabric of women’s talk occurred to us and the familiar, satisfying assumption that women could talk about *anything* unravelled as we spoke. (Anderson in Anderson & Shields, 2001, p.vii).

Shields elaborated on this theme of talk and silence:

There were things our mothers hadn't voiced, the subjects our teachers had neglected, the false prophetic warnings we had been given and the fatal silence surrounding particular areas of anxiety or happiness. Why weren't we told? Why weren't we warned?
(Shields in Anderson & Shields, 2001, p.346)

I read these essays by academics, homemakers, politicians, writers and lawyers. I read stories of friendship, parenting, sex, illness, loss and more. Why don't more women talk about this stuff, I wondered? It would be so much better if women were more honest with each other, I decided. Not me, though, of course. Other women. Brave, ballsy women who don't mind being eviscerated for daring to speak up. There is a lot of autobiographical material I am reluctant to unpack: my first daughter's death, the response of my family when I stopped being a Mormon, the way I preserved my marriage with a promise of silence on religious matters that lasted for several years – was I weak to promise it? Was my husband unkind to require it? – I don't know; I don't want to think about these things. I don't want to write about them. I have wrapped these stories in silence and packed them away.

And yet, I recently came across a call for papers for an anthology that will respond to Elaine Hansen's *Mother Without Child*. It will be called *Mothers Without Their Children*. I could unwrap my first daughter's story, I think. I could go back to a Tuesday in 1999 and watch the twenty three year old version of me – invincible, entitled and absolutely certain of her place in the world – hand her daughter to a midwife who taps the baby's feet. *Tap, tap, tap*. And then her back. *Tap, tap, tap*. Harder now, the baby held almost upside down. *Smack, smack, smack*. 'I don't understand,' the midwife says. 'Her little heart's going like the clappers.'

The twenty three year old me is so certain of her deservingness that she doesn't worry until she hears the sirens. What happens next is recorded on a video her husband films with *we'll-look-back-on-this-and-laugh* optimism. The skating sound of a portable incubator's wheels; the paediatrician working quickly and cheerfully; the ambulance driver's jokes about running red lights. Everyone is jolly.

'We'll admit her and sort out her breathing,' the paediatrician says as he inserts a nasal cannula.

'Is she going to be all right?'

'We'll have a proper look at her when we get there.'

In the years that follow she will hear the evasiveness of his answer, loud and clear whenever she watches the video and, in the final close up before her daughter is wheeled away, she will see her tiny face twitching as she fits.

This younger version of me will, by the end of the following week, be someone else entirely. Someone who, having previously insisted on life at any cost, will call time on the resuscitation of her child. 'That's enough,' she will say. And the exhausted doctor whose skin is the colour of porridge

and who, on this latest call out, has misbuttoned his stripy shirt, will look relieved as he asks, ‘Are you sure?’

There are orphans and there are widows, but there isn’t a word for the thing that happened to the twenty three year old me – a thing that was historically too common, and is latterly too awful, to name. I’m sure I have more to say about it, and I suspect it will be unclear and illogical and open to mistakes, but maybe I should say it anyway.

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I recently reread *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*. It was a very different experience from the one I had six years ago, but I am a very different reader from the one that first approached these stories. My children are older; my oldest son is about to go to university and my daughter has just left primary school. This time, when I read phrases such as: ‘She saw his lack of ease in the world, and grieved for him, and knew it was her fault because she was his mother’ (Simpson, 2001, p.28), I *didn’t* think of my daughter who, for the moment at least, appears to like me (and herself) more than I could have anticipated when I first approached Simpson’s stories. She has grown into a girl who won’t watch films unless they pass the Bechdel test. A girl who plays football for Sefton and wears boys’ shoes to school because they are comfier. A girl who was recently delighted when, after a school holiday, a fellow female classmate turned up wearing a brand new pair of comfy, boys’ shoes. I sometimes watch her from an upstairs window as she leaves the house in the mornings, scuffing down the street to the bus stop. I stand there assailed by a new set of fears; fears Simpson voices in this collection of stories, but which were strangely invisible to me six years ago: ‘It was going to be a long series of leave-takings from now on, she thought; goodbye and goodbye and goodbye’ (Simpson, 2001, p.32).

In the title story of *Hey yeah right get a life* Dorrie says, ‘You get to thirty-seven, married, three kids, and you look in the mirror, at least I did this morning, and you realise – it’s a shock – you realise nothing else is supposed to happen until you die. Or you spoil the pattern’ (Simpson, 2001, p.35). Perhaps this pattern needs spoiling. I used to view the romantic novels I was reading as escapism – but I now see that there is a fine line between escaping and vanishing altogether. In a *Believer* interview Anne Enright said, ‘People whose lives are upside down often read fiction. When you’re not sure where you’ll end up or how you are going to be, and you’re looking for some way forward, fiction is a great friend’ (Enright, 2014). Books then, like friends, may be chosen wisely; may help their readers to fill that strange and all too often overlooked gap between *happily ever after* and *the end* – after all, it’s hard to envision what might happen next if you haven’t imagined sundry versions of it.

In the afterward of *Dropped Threads: What We Aren’t Told* Carol Shields wrote about the part of her life that came after marriage and the births of her five children.

In 1985 I looked up from my desk and realized that the children had gone, all five of them. The house was quieter now. The days were mine to arrange any way I wished. I wrote a novel

in which, for the first time, there were no children. It was a different kind of novel than I'd written before, with a more inventive structure. The publisher was worried about this innovation, but I was insistent. The insistence was something new, and it coloured the chapter I was living in, my early-middle-age chapter. The woman I saw in the mirror looked like someone else, but I knew it was really me, relocated in time and breathing another grade of oxygen.
(Shields in Anderson & Shields, 2001, p.345)

I like Shields' version of early-middle-age – a quiet house and whole days to arrange, a chapter coloured by a new insistence.

The women whose novels, stories and essays I have read in recent years have demonstrated to me that domesticity is not a synonym for stagnation; that motherhood involves joy *and* misery; that silences may be broken; and that women's lives are worth writing about, whether via fiction or autobiography. As I own both the joyful and miserable parts of motherhood, as I read more of the 'friendly' kind of fiction, and as I begin to write something new, I'm not, as Simpson's Dorrie suggests, *spoiling* the expected pattern of my life. I'm just deviating from it. I may be somewhat in the dark and I may lack the aerial perspective to observe the effect of these deviations, but that's all right – the process of creation always begins in the shadows: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep' (Genesis 1: 1-2). 'Where is the story?' Margaret Atwood asks. 'The story is in the dark. That is why inspiration is thought of as coming in flashes. Going into a narrative – into the process – is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead' (Atwood, 2003, p.158). When traversing a dark road, it's good to be accompanied by a friend. As I begin this journey I have fiction by Miriam Toews, Rose Tremain, Helen Oyeyemi and Robert Hellenga for company and for illumination.

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